

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE D-16WASHINGTON POST
26 October 1979

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Keeping the Lid on Billy's Libya Trip

Like Richard Nixon before him, Jimmy Carter has tried quietly, if futilely, to be his brother's keeper. Both presidents used the all-seeing, all-knowing federal apparatus to keep an anxious watch on their errant brothers.

In the loneliness of the Oval Office, Nixon and Carter shared a personal penchant for secrecy and sublimation. Yet both had their souls tested by overindulgent, overly talkative brothers whose loud cracks and voracious appetites caused political embarrassment.

The two wayward brothers, Donald Nixon and Billy Carter, also had much in common. They shared a weakness for easy money and an indiscretion about how they acquired it. Both also recognized the financial advantages of having a brother in the White House.

In fact, both got their names linked with man-about-the-world Robert Vesco, who allegedly skipped the country with hundreds of millions of dollars belonging to other people. Apparently, he was willing to share a few million with insiders who had the right White House connections.

In the early 1970s, President Nixon asked White House aide John Ehrlichman to keep tabs on Donald. The harassed Ehrlichman did his best to prevent Donald's indiscretions from bubble-gumming in his brother's face.

In the late 1970s, President Carter asked White House aide Tom Beard to try to keep Billy out of trouble. Beard's most delicate task was to soft-pedal Billy's dealings with the Libyans, who have granted arms and asylum to some

of the world's most notorious renegades.

We have just learned, for example, that the White House was alerted a year ago that Billy had accepted an all-expenses-paid trip to Libya. There was worry inside the White House over his intentions and his traveling companions. So in the strictest confidence, Beard asked the State Department to monitor the visit and, if possible, to restrain the fun-loving, beer-swilling Billy.

Instructions were flashed to the U.S. embassy in Libya "to greet [the] Georgia delegation, to learn members' names and to alert them to sensitive nature of U.S.-Libyan relations."

Billy arrived in grand style, with eight Georgia politicians and businessmen. They traveled first-class, stayed at the best hotels and were shown around Tripoli in chauffeur-driven cars. The Libyans picked up all the bills and handed out gifts. The cost was estimated at over \$50,000.

Meanwhile, embassy officials dutifully took Billy aside and cautioned him about rocking the diplomatic boat. Charge d'affaires William Eagleton cabled back: "Billy Carter has told us that he will refrain from making any political comments, and this has been borne out thus far. For example, in reply to a long welcoming speech at the airport, Billy shook hands and most amiably said, 'Thank you.'"

Intelligence sources told us that Billy spoke to the Libyans privately about lifting the freeze on eight transport planes, which the Libyans had purchased from the United States but

which Washington had blocked. But nothing leaked out that was embarrassing to brother Jimmy.

At last, Eagleton reported in a confidential cable: "Billy Carter and the Georgia delegation left Tripoli for Rome... We accompanied the Georgia delegation from the VIP lounge to the door of the aircraft... As far as we can see, there has been no negative fallout from Billy Carter's visit to Tripoli. In fact, on the local scene we would rate it as a very positive event..."

The White House was grateful. This was passed on to Eagleton in a letter marked "Secret" and signed by Leonard Scensny, then the country officer for Libya.

"The White House was pleased with how Billy Carter's trip came out," wrote Scensny. "Tom Beard, who worked with us on this, said that they appreciated your efforts to brief Mr. Carter and to keep the whole trip on a very low key."

Not until a year later did it leak out that the Justice Department is investigating allegations that Vesco had plotted to pass out \$30 million in bribes to Carter associates in return for obtaining transport planes for Libya. Billy Carter's name has been dragged into the investigation, although there is no evidence of wrongdoing.

Footnote: Scensny acknowledged guardedly that "we let the White House know what Billy was doing." Beard refused an immediate comment but promised to call back. He never responded to our subsequent calls. The State Department declassified some of the documents for us in response to a Freedom of Information request.